DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 743 FL 020 466

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TITLE The Oral Dimensions of Literacy Events: A Letter from the DHSS.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 17p.; In: Written Language: British Studies in Applied Linguistics 2. Papers from the Annual Meeting of the British Association for Applied Linguistics (Reading, England, September 1986); see FL 020 460.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Applied Linguistics; Cooperation; Discourse Analysis; Ethnography; Foreign Countries; Immigrants; *Interpersonal Communication; *Literacy; *Oral Language; Sociocultural Patterns; *Sociolinguistics
IDENTIFIERS England (London); Morocco

ABSTRACT

After a review of the theoretical context to current research on literacy, consideration is given to aspects of the literacy practices of the Moroccan community in the Ladbroke Grover area of West London. Findings from a study of literacy in its social context in Morocco are cited in the discussion of the West London practices. Emphasis is on the use of ethnographic approaches to describe the complex uses of literacy in contemporary Morocco and the extrapolation from this situated work of a proposed general framework for studying literacy in complex societies. The concept of "jointly achieved literacy events" in the London context is described in which a mediator was recruited to read a letter to an illiterate adult and then to write a response to it. The implicit social interactional rules are also discussed that regulate the type and amount of talk about what is written. The literacy event involved both cooperation and conflict. It is noted that the ethnographic approach proposes that literacy should be studied in the context of its use, that there is no great division between orality and literacy, and that in concrete social settings literacy is done through talk. Finally, it is concluded that the social interactional rules regulating the type and amount of talk about what is written might best be understood within a pragmatic theory that can deal with the discourse of unequal encounters and recognizes the role of conflict as well as cooperation in talk. Contains 12 references. (LB)

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THE ORAL DIMENSIONS OF LITERACY EVENTS: A LETTER FROM THE DHSS

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The Theoretical Context

The study of literacy in its social context has been advocated by a number of anthropologists, sociolinguists and ethnographers of speaking over the last decade or so. In his programmatic paper, The Ethnography of Writing, Basso concludes with this statement:

> Adequate ethnographies of writing do not yet exist because linguists and anthropologists alike have grown accustomed to investigating written codes with only passing reference to the social systems in which they are embedded. In this essay, I have suggested that the time has come for this strategy to be reversed. When all is said and done, we shall find that the activity of writing, like the activity of speaking, is a supremely social act. Simultaneously, I believe, we shall find that it is far more complex - and therefore more intriguing - than we have suspected heretofore.
>
> (Basso 1974)

Szwed in his paper The Ethnography of Literacy writes:

> But the stunning fact is that we do not fully know what literacy is. The assumption that it is simply a matter of the skills of reading and writing does not even begin to approach the fundamental problem: what are reading and writing for?
>
> (Szwed 1981)

He invites the student of literacy to step outside the classroom:

> I propose that we step back from the question of instruction, back to an even more basic 'basic', the social meaning of

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> literacy: that is, the roles these abilities play in social life; the varieties of reading and writing available for choice; the contexts of their performance; and the manner in which they are interpreted and tested, not by experts, but by ordinary people in ordinary activities.
>
> (ibid)

This approach suggests that literacy practices are complexly patterned, like other communicative and social practices and that the study of the social meaning of literacy can be enriched by ethnographic methods, typically fieldwork involving participant observation, gathering autobiographical accounts of literacy practices as well as analysis of texts.

A number of studies have focussed on the social meaning of literacy and exemplify the approaches advocated by Basso and Szwed. The Scollons have looked at literacy in the context of interethnic communication, suggesting that for Athabaskan students to perform well in the literacy of the dominant Anglo culture they have to abandon preferred communicative patterns:

> The Athabaskan set of discourse patterns are to a large extent mutually exclusive of the discourse patterns of essayist prose. In order to write, the Athabaskan must adopt discourse patterns that are identified with a particular ethnic group, identified in Canada and Alaska as English speakers.
>
> (Scollon & Scollon 1981)

They suggest that the demands of schooling, particularly of writing essayist prose, produce internal conflict in the Athabaskan writer, similar to the crosscultural conflict that can be produced in oral communication when two speakers from different ethnic groups fail to identify the ground rules for mutual understanding.

Heath, in a project which studied communicative practices in three communities in the Piedmont Carolinas, a white working class community, a black working class community and the townspeople, black and white, who are members of the mainstream, dominant culture, finds differences in the 'ways with words' of these three groups, both spoken

and written, which significantly affect the life chances of the two working class communities (Heath 1983).

Scribner and Cole, in a study which sets out to challenge dominant conceptions of writing, such as the essayist literacy referred to above, write:

> But we believe that near-exclusive preoccupation with school-based writing practices has some unfortunate consequences. The assumption that logicality is in the text and the text is in the school can lead to a serious underestimation of the cognitive skills involved in non-school, non-essay writing, and, reciprocally, to an overestimation of the intellectual skills that the essayist test necessarily entails.
>
> (Scribner & Cole 1981)

They studied the literacy practices of the Vai people of Northwestern Liberia who have potential access to three literacies, an indigenous Vai script, Arabic and English, with the object of testing out dominant hypotheses on the effects of literacy, notably that there is a great divide between the literate and the non-literate, that literacy is a necessary prerequisite for logical thinking, that becoming literate entails fundamental cognitive restructurings, that control intellectual performance in all domains.

The arguments that have emerged from this approach to the study of literacy have been synthesised in a useful way by Street in his book Literacy in Theory and Practice (Street 1984). He proposes that there is an 'autonomous model' of literacy which corresponds to the dominant conceptions that Scribner and Cole refer to. The autonomous model proposes that there are universalistic consequences of literacy, like the existence of fundamental differences of cognitive organisation between literate and non-literate individuals and groups, and the claim that literacy is a fundamental precondition for the development of logical thought and abstraction. Street argues that the proponents of the autonomous model, while claiming to read off large scale consequences for literacy, are in fact naturalising and universalising the literacy practices of a particular dominant group, typically those who have successfully been through the school system, typically themselves. In

opposition to this autonomous model of literacy, with its universalising claims and tacit ethnocentric bias, Street develops an 'ideological model' of literacy. Street's ideological model draws on many of the characteristics of the ethnographic approach to literacy research mentioned above and indeed cites Scribner and Cole, Heath, and the Scollons as illustrations. The ideological model rejects over-ambitious generalisations about the consequences of literacy. Instead it proposes an attempt to understand literacy in terms of concrete social practices and to theorise it in terms of the ideologies in which different literacies are embedded. Specifically he argues against a 'great divide' between orality and literacy (citing Finnegan [unpublished]). In contrast to a monolithic conception of literacy, to which non-literacy is opposed, the ideological model proposes, along with Cole and Scribner, Heath, Scollon and Scollon, and others, that there are literacies, situated social practices which must be investigated in their own terms in order to generate more complex and grounded hypotheses into the nature of literacy, its relationship to oral communication and the embedding of both into given socio-political orders.

The Moroccan Study

Having established this theoretical context to current work on literacy, I would now like to go on to consider aspects of the literacy practices of the Moroccan community in the Ladbroke Grove area of West London. The majority of Moroccans in West London come from the North West of Morocco, from the area in and around Tangier and Larache. These are areas with a history of migration, both internally, from the country to the city, and externally to Europe, mostly France, Germany, Belgium and Holland. The migration to Britain developed in the 1960s with the boom in the hotel business which led to workers being actively recruited from abroad. The 1971 Immigration Act halted this process and Moroccan immigration into the UK since then has largely consisted of dependants coming to join their families. Migration attracted people from a wide range of educational backgrounds, ranging from those with little or no schooling to those who completed their secondary education but saw their life chances blocked in Morocco and decided to try work abroad.

In my consideration of the literacy practices of the community in London, I will be drawing on the work of a large scale study of literacy in its social context in Morocco which is being undertaken under the direction of Daniel Wagner of the University of Pennsylvania in collaboration with the Faculty of Education of the Mohammed V University in Rabat. This study, drawing on data from survey, interviews and ethnographies, takes up a broad range of issues which it is beyond the scope of this paper adequately to refer to. What is of immediate interest however is the use of ethnographic approaches to describe the complex uses of literacy in contemporary Morocco and the extrapolation from this situated work of a proposed general framework for studying literacy in complex societies.

Wagner and his associates take the 'literacy event' as the basic unit of observation, as do Heath, Street and others. Heath for example quotes a definition of the literacy event from Anderson, Teal and Estrada (1980) as 'any sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or comprehension of print plays a role'. Heath suggests that 'literacy events have social interactional rules which regulate the type and amount of **talk** about what is written, and define ways in which **oral language** reinforces, denies, extends, or sets aside the written material'.

There are a number of points coming out of the study in Morocco which have direct relevance to the literacy practices of the Moroccan community in London. Wagner points out that 'historically to be illiterate was not considered a negative stigma, though it can be in contemporary Morocco (Wagner, Messick & Spratt , forthcoming). He notes that 'literacy is now often perceived as a need and a right whereas it was once something that a person as a member of a group or neighbourhood might accomplish indirectly' (ibid). Wagner speaks of traditional mediators of literacy, formal and informal. These include public writers, with differing degrees of specialised knowledge of legal literacies. The preparation of legal documents is the province of the notary or 'adil. A second category of public writers, with a low level of self taught expertise in legal matters, carry out day to day literacy work, often using typewriters to fill out forms for people, write personal letters. Wagner asserts that, despite the recent development of a 'modern' ideology of personal literacy, traditional mediators of literacy are by no means out of business. He estimates that considerably less than

half the adult Moroccan population can read or write with fluency in any language. As well as these professional mediators of literacy, informal mediators are often found on family or neighbourhood networks. Parents may depend on their literate children to read to them. Wagner suggests that these 'joint literacy events' contrast with the modern ideology of individual literacy. He asserts that 'literacy is not possessed and understood only by a small elite, even in countries where a majority can neither read nor write' (Wagner, Messick and Spratt, cited above).

A Literacy Event

I would like now to examine the concept of 'jointly achieved literacy events' in which an individual calls on a 'mediator of literacy' in the London context. I will cite a tape of a literacy event recorded during an interview carried out as part of the fieldwork for a study of oral narrative. (See pages 102 to 106 for extracts.)

The scene is the sitting room of Touria's flat. I have arrived, armed with a cassette tape recorder, to interview her. Touria's aunt, Menana, is also visiting. Menana has received a letter from the DHSS and asks me to tell her what it says.

I read the letter and tell her the gist of it (see extract 1 below). The DHSS claim that she has continued to cash her giro book after she started work and demand repayment of £96.96. She angrily denies the DHSS claim. The reader will notice that I am very careful to attribute each statement that I relay to her, making clear that the DHSS is making these claims, not me: 'it says they've given you too much supplementary benefit, too much money'. No one wants to be the bearer of bad news and there is a thin line between bearing the accusations of others and making those accusations yourself. Coulmas, in a recent paper points out that:

> for linguistic communication it is very important to be able to report what other speakers have said or meant without committing oneself to the contents of what was said in the first place.
>
> (Coulmas 1986)

My care in attributing each claim in the DHSS letter reflects, I think, an awareness of the ambiguity, inherent in my position of mediator of literacy, bringer of bad news.

Menana's response to the gist of the letter is a vehement denial of the accusation which takes the form of a story, the story of what really happened, ('the book I'm give him the book straight', 'yeah I'm give him the book back when me start work ...straight...). We can perhaps call the DHSS letter provocative: it provokes Menana's response, which is structured as an emergent narrative.

In response to Menana's denial, I propose a strategy to her for taking it further: go and see Souad, who is a Moroccan worker at the local CAB. Menana has the right of appeal. I try to explain the concept of appeal and then go on to paraphrase the contents of the letter more fully, producing what is, in effect, a simplified version of the text.

My paraphrase is, in effect, repeating the accusation and produces a repeated denial of the circumstances surrounding the cashing of the disputed giro cheque. Menana, assisted by Touria, continues to reconstruct the narrative of what actually happened, provoked by the challenge of the DHSS letter, mediated through my reading of it. The narrative serves to explain why she cashed the giro: she is paid a week in hand by the new job, for the first week she receives nothing, she has to pay the rent and buy food for herself and her daughter. How could she do that without cashing her giro cheque?

Menana then switches into Spanish, possibly as a way of regaining control of the conversation from her niece, who is beginning to speak for her. Menana again elaborates her narrative of what happened in Spanish and I again repeat my go-and-see-Souad (or rather my tiene-que-ir-hablar-con-Souad) strategy, supported by Touria, who although she cannot speak Spanish, presumably catches the gist of what is being said on hearing the name Souad and re-enters the conversation with 'yeah souad she do it for you'.

In extract 2 I elaborate my advice, which up till now has been mainly focussed on persuading Menana to go and see Souad (the professional):

'well what you should do you have to write a letter saying'

At his point Menana challenges my advice in a very clear way, by drawing my attention to the fact that it is not necessary to write a letter at all, there is a space on the letter from the DHSS to register that you wish to appeal:

'what this write letter this letter ( ) fill this form small'

She points to the letter and asks, in both English and Spanish:

'what she tell him que quiere decir'

At this point I give in, after a pause, and offer to write the letter.

In extract 3, Menana, Touria and myself are reconstructing the story of what actually happened, in this case working out which office Menana went to. This is for my benefit, as part of my work of composing the letter of appeal. After extensive discussion in English, Spanish and Moroccan Arabic, Menana points out the obvious: the address of the office will be on the letter she has received: 'yeah ... look the letter where she come from'.

What is interesting about both these incidents is not my lack of commonsense or concentration on the literacy tasks in hand: conveying the gist of the DHSS letter to Menana and composing a reply. It is the fact that she, while not being literate in any language, is sufficiently knowledgeable about certain aspects of text organisation (what you expect to find in a DHSS letter) that she can intervene actively at key moments in order to shape the development of the literacy event and secure her own purposes: to get me to write her response to the DHSS letter.

In extract 4 I am finishing off the letter. Menana herself wants to get off as she has to go to work. I am however keen that she should hear back what I have written, agree it and sign it. While I am reading it back, I get positive feedback from Menana ('yeah... yeah... that's it'), who caps my final statement, 'I did not cash it after that' with her own 'nothing no eat

one penny him' and provides her own evaluation of the whole incident in both English and Spanish 's crazy locos'.

So what are we to make of this literacy event? Firstly we can say that the literate work that is done is grounded in talk: my silent reading produces versions of the letter which I convey to Menana. The information thus conveyed provokes her response in which she uses narrative strategies to deny the claim in the letter that she owes the DHSS money. The working out of the response involves interaction in English, Spanish and Moroccan Arabic. I read the reply I have composed and it is orally evaluated by Menana. It is interesting to refer to Heath's Ways with Words in which she gives an account of the literacy practices of Trackton, the black working class community, writing:

> For Trackton adults, reading is a social activity; when something is read in Trackton, it almost always provokes narratives, jokes, sidetracking talk, and active negotiation of the meaning of written texts among the listeners.
>
> (Ways with Words page 196)

Secondly, we can see quite clearly the process by which Menana recruited me as mediator, first to tell her what the letter from the DHSS said and then, quite unwillingly on my part, to reply for her. Once she has recruited me to do the literacy work, that work is achieved jointly, with quite notable interventions from herself. We can perhaps distinguish these interventions as being (a) on the level of **content**, in that she contributes information which specifically contradicts the information contained in the DHSS letter, information structured as a narrative which is then transformed by me into a letter notifying the DHSS of Menana's wish to appeal the grounds for the appeal, and (b) on the level of **form** at those moments when she uses her knowledge of the forms of literacy to intervene in the shaping of the literacy event. It is intervention on the level of form which constitutes the powerful strategy by which she finally gets me to write the response for her.

For the third point I wish to raise, I turn back to Heath's statement that literacy events have social interactional rules that regulate the type and amount of talk about what is written. I am struck in reviewing the unfolding of this literacy event, in which I was a participant, by the role

that conflict plays in this unfolding. In a recent paper, Candlin has spoken of 'explaining moments of conflict in discourse', citing examples from institutional settings. Fairclough (1986) refers to work on unequal encounters in institutional settings and stresses the need for discourse analysis to explore the role of institutional power and status in overdetermining interactional patterns. Now I would argue that what is happening in this literacy event is that an institutional voice, the message of the letter that the DHSS sent to Menana, has intruded into a setting which would normally be regarded as marked for informality: her niece's front room. As mediator of literacy I am introducing this voice into the conversation. The message of this letter, with its demand that Menana repay £96.96, produces a response of anger and resentment (a perlocutionary effect in the vocabulary of speech act theory) and provokes her to tell her own version of events. This is the primary conflict in the situation, between the DHSS's demand for repayment and Menana's rejection of that demand. There are however other conflicts going on as the interaction develops. There is a conflict between my strategy for action and Menana's unwillingness to adopt it. My strategy is typically professional: when in doubt, refer. I am in doubt as to the best thing to do, so I refer her on to Souad. Menana, who is not in good health, is not keen, understandably, to trail down to the CAB on her one day off in the week when she has someone on hand who is perfectly capable of fulfilling her purposes (ie me). Menana is operating an informal network strategy of the type described by Wagner. She is able to use effective strategies to achieve the solution to her immediate problem in the face of quite spirited opposition from me, being doggedly committed to my professional strategy of referral.

Fairclough (1985) has criticised the notion that exchange of information between participants having equal discoursal and pragmatic rights and obligations is the unmarked case, focussing on Grice's cooperative principle. He regards the idealisation underlying such theories of 'communication' or 'conversation' as being inadequate to deal with the discourse of unequal encounters. I would suggest, using this literacy event as prima facie evidence, that a useful pragmatic theory must be able to deal with the management of conflict in conversation, just as much as it must be able to handle the achievement of cooperation between participants. Menana's account of what actually happened is achieved in conflict with the accusation made in the letter from the DHSS. The

development of this literacy event can be seen in terms of a struggle between participants to determine the way it should develop and its eventual outcome.

Conclusion

The ethnographic approach proposes that literacy should be studied in the context of its use, that there is no great divide between orality and literacy and that in concrete social settings literacy is done through talk. I have tried to illustrate this approach in the consideration of the literacy event that ensued when Menana asked me to tell her what was in the DHSS letter. We have seen how the shaping of the literacy event involved both cooperation and conflict. Menana, the participant who might least be expected to be in control of an interaction which involves reading and writing, is able to intervene and play an important part in the shaping of the literacy event. Following Candlin and Fairclough, I have tentatively suggested that the social interactional rules regulating the type and amount of talk about what is written might best be understood within a pragmatic theory that can deal with the discourse of unequal encounters and recognises the role of conflict as well as cooperation in talk.

A letter from the DHSS: extracts from the data

M = Menana, T = Touria, I = Interviewer
( ) = talk not transcribed, ... = pause

Extract 1: Paraphrasing the DHSS letter for Menana.
Her response to it.
My strategy for responding: go and see Souad

I: department of health and social security
M: yeah what's happen
I: supplementary benefit ... oh dear ...
M: what's happen Mike
I: it says they've given you too much supplementary benefit too much money

M: social security no much give it to me because I'm pay the rent twenty six pound twenty four pound for the rent still to me twenty four onlo give me this ...
T: shnu 'andum ...
I: it says they've given you ninety six pounds too much
M: nooh never give me ninety six... give me every week
I: yeah
M: the book I'm give him the book straight ...
I: it says they wanted you to give the book back when you started work
N: yeah I'm give him the book back when me start work ... straight ...
I: mmm... do you know what I think you ought to do
M: yeah
I: is a problem like this is a bit difficult you know is a difficult problem you ought to erm do you know Souad who works in the office there
T: yeah Souad
M: yeah Souad yeah
I: if you go and see her and then ask her to write a letter cos you have to you have to write the letter to say this is wrong
M: s a wrong
T: mm
I: it's called an appeal you have to make an appeal ... let me just tell you I'll tell you exactly what the letter says it says dear madam I'm sorry to tell you that you have been paid ninety six pounds too much because of you didn't give the book back when you started work
M: yeah I'm give him straight
I: straight away
M: yeah
T: yes
I: it says that you can (.....)
M: no I'm give him straight the book
T: straight on when she (.....) she give him straight on
M: (.....) give him straight away the lady take with me cut the book
I: straight away
T: yes
M: yeah straight away
I: because they says that you didn't they say here that you didn't do it
M: nooh do it straight first week call first week after give him me collect the money friday I'm give him monday
T: monday ( )

M: no no no no take the money no take the money monday I'm leave the money in the book I'm give him
T: because she off monday and she start work
M: yeah
T: she start work
M: no
T: ( ) she get first week for her work the first week is friday
M: yeah
T: she get her money and then ( )
M: (.....)
D: and monday she go straight away she don't go to post office to take money she go straight on to give him his book because she have money now
I: she gave

M: yo cobrar
T: yes
M: cobrar el viernes el lunes cobrar social security no
I: yeah
M: yo no cobrar lo lleva asi
I: si
M: el abril el día cinco
I: dia cinco
M: yo empieza a trabajar el día cinco el día trece lo da el libro el día cinco si coje money
I: si
M: because starting monday yo cobrar
I: pues ellos dicen que entre el cinco y el diez y siete
M: eso
I: tenía vd tenía el libro
M: si yo cobrar el día cinco
I: si
M: pero el día cinco empieza a trabajar qué comer qué pagar la renta
I: ah hah
M: ahora ahora todavía no pagáste la renta que tambien lo dice a mi ( )
I: bueno tiene que ir a la oficina hablar hablar con souad
T: yeah souad she do it for you

Extract 2: Menana challenges my strategy and I offer to write a response for her myself

I: well what you should do you have to write a letter saying
M: this letter look (.....) send me this letter look this (.....)
I: I think it's much better Menana if you take erm take this to see Souad because she understands all the problems
T: yes
I: and what you'll have to do is write a letter saying I returned
M: what this write letter this letter (.....) fill this form small
I: yeah
T: (.....)
M: what she tell him qué quiere decir
I: pues ... (.....)
I: do you want me to write the letter
M: yeah please
I: can you tell me I'll start start the letter and you can tell me
M: empieza a trabajar el día cinco de abril

Extract 3: Reconstructing the story of what actually happened

I: where where did you give dónde eh dónde trajiste el libro este
M: social security
I: dónde en westbourne grove
T: yeah westbourne grove
M: yeah westbourne grove ... no no this westbourne grove here no no no
I: el otro
M: l otro
I: como se llama
M: no sé como se llama
T: mashi dyel hinaya
M: nooh the rounjit baker street
I: lisson grove
M: yeah this one nearly in baker street
I: yeah
M: yeah ... look the letter where she come from

Extract 4: Reading the letter back to Menana and her evaluation of the incident

M: no necesita a mi because marcha a trabajar marcha en sitio de mi sobrino
I: yeah
M: si porque marcha de holiday y lo deja a mi la llave a una oficina sabe
I: de modo que va para limpiar
M: si
I: espera un momentito que yo voy a yo voy a
M: bueno ...
I: le voy a leer I wish to appeal against your demand of ninety six pound ninety six I returned the book to the office in lisson grove on the 13th of april I started work on the 5th of april I cashed the cheque for the week of the fifth
M: yeah
I: because I did not have the money to pay my rent
M: yeah
I: to buy food for myself and my daughter
M: that's it
I: I did not cash it after that
M: nothing no eat one penny him
I: uh
M: no eat one no deja a mi one penny s crazy locos

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